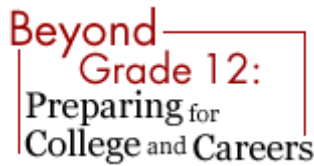


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States Push to Align Policies From Pre-K to Postsecondary

By Lynn Olson



Faced with stiffer economic competition and worried about the skills of their future workforces, many states are trying to connect education from preschool through postsecondary so that more students are prepared for further study, work, and citizenship.

In the past decade, 30 states have created what are often called “P-16” councils or initiatives designed to increase collaboration across those levels of education, according to the Denver-based Education Commission of the States.

“I think over the past four or five years, the awareness of these issues has grown dramatically, so it is really on the radar screen of many policymakers,” said Michael W. Kirst, a professor of education at Stanford University. “But I think we’re a long way from framing the issues and really understanding how to grapple with them.”

In most states, the governance, finance, data, and accountability systems for pre-K-12 and higher education have largely operated separately, with different legislative committees, governing boards, and state agencies.

That divide, policy experts say, has contributed to a maze of disconnected policies and practices that is hard for young people and their families to navigate. It’s also wasted taxpayer dollars, such as when the public pays for students to relearn material in college that should have been mastered in high school.

All Aboard

Many states are participating in two prominent national initiatives to better connect K-12 and postsecondary education and training.

*Click image to see the full chart.



SOURCES: Achieve Inc., National Governors Association, 2006

Although efforts to build smoother bridges linking the key stages of education are still in their infancy—with many P-16 councils lacking the authority and staffing to make real change—observers say they’re encouraged by the greater interest in and increasing focus of such work.

As part of the National Governors Association’s Honor States Grant Program, for example, participating states must establish P-16 councils. The \$23.6 million, governor-led initiative is designed to improve the rates of high school graduation and college readiness in 26 states.

“I’m really quite bullish on what’s going on,” said David A. Longanecker, the executive director of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, or WICHE, a Boulder, Colo.-based regional organization that promotes greater access and excellence in higher education, “and I was quite critical for many years.”

Indiana’s ‘Learning Pains’

One of the best-known efforts is Indiana’s 30-member “Education Roundtable,” formed by the late Gov. Frank L. O’Bannon and state Superintendent of Public Instruction Suellen K. Reed in 1998.

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The central focus has been on increasing the rigor of students’ academic preparation by making the “Core 40,” a college-preparatory curriculum, the default high school coursework for all Hoosier students. A bill passed in April 2005 also requires Indiana’s four-year public colleges to require the Core 40 for admissions, effective with the 2011-12 school year.

Currently, 67 percent of Indiana students complete a Core 40 diploma, with nearly a third exceeding those requirements to graduate with an academic-honors diploma. In the past decade, Indiana also has jumped from 34th to 10th in the nation in sending its students to college directly after high school.

“We think that not only has the better preparation helped in that respect,” said Stanley Jones, the commissioner of higher education in Indiana, “but it’s also spurred many young people who hadn’t thought about going to college or didn’t think they could, to do that.”

Still, he acknowledged, “we went through the learning pains of thinking that if you got the right people around the table, the right things would happen.”

“We learned two things,” he said. “One is that you really need an agenda”—in this case, provided by the Core 40—“and then, interestingly enough, the policymakers need professional development. We have brought in on a regular basis people from other states, people from national organizations, to educate the policymakers on what’s going on across the country ... because any state gets to be too insular.”

Preparing Educators

While Indiana’s P-16 initiative has focused on high schools, Louisiana has targeted its improvements at teacher and administrator preparation.

In 1999, the governor, the state board of elementary and secondary education, and the state board that sets policy for public higher education formed a blue-ribbon commission charged with working across the various levels of education to better recruit, prepare, and retain high-quality teachers and principals.

A Sampling of P-16 Councils

Indiana:

The Education Roundtable was formed by the late Gov. Frank L. O’Bannon and state Superintendent of Public Instruction Suellen K. Reed in 1998; formalized by law in 1999. Includes 30 members representing the legislature and education, business, and community groups. Charged with recommending ways to bolster student achievement to the governor, state superintendent, legislature, and state school board.

Louisiana:

The Blue Ribbon Commission for Educational Excellence was formed in 1999 by the governor, state school board, and state board of regents. One-third of the commission’s members come from higher education, one-third from precollegiate education, and one-third from state leadership levels, including the commissioner of higher education, the governor’s education adviser, the state schools superintendent, and business leaders.

Kentucky:

The state’s P-16 council was created in 1999 by the Kentucky state school board and the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education, the state’s higher education coordinating board. Its 18 members include state officials in charge of early-childhood development, K-12 education, higher education, adult education, and workforce development, as well

as business and labor representatives. As in Georgia, there are also local P-16 councils that work on issues at the regional level.

Georgia:

The Georgia Education Coordinating Council was established by the governor in 1995 and enacted into law in 2000. Reconfigured as the Alliance of Education Agency Heads under current Gov. Sonny Purdue, it consists of agency heads and governing board chairs for the departments of early care and learning, education, technical and adult education, the University System of Georgia, and the Georgia Professional Standards Commission. Under the direction of the alliance, chaired by Superintendent Kathy Cox, a permanent P-16 council made up of representatives from each of the agencies and the business community serves as a working group to carry out the alliance's recommendations and projects.

SOURCES: The Education Commission of the States and *Education Week*

“A major reason for this commission was that in our state we had a K-12 accountability system, and our districts were being held accountable for the achievement of students, and they were expressing concerns about the quality of teachers and leaders coming out of our universities,” said Jeanne M. Burns, a co-director of the Blue Ribbon Commission for Educational Excellence.

At the end of each year, the panel’s recommendations are weighed by a joint meeting of the board of regents and the board of elementary and secondary education, whose members decide which recommendations to adopt as policy and require their staffs to pursue. “So there’s a mechanism to make sure something is happening,” said Ms. Burns, who also serves as the associate commissioner of teacher education initiatives for the governor’s office and the board of regents.

One outgrowth of those recommendations was a requirement that all universities develop P-16 redesign teams, representing precollegiate educators and faculty members from their teacher-training programs and the arts and sciences. The teams were assigned to revise their institutions’ teacher-preparation and educational leadership programs to better reflect the state’s K-12 content standards as well as national and state standards for teachers.

The state brought in national experts to review the plans, which then had to be approved by both boards. By this July 1, all public and private universities in Louisiana need to have their redesigned programs in place to admit candidates, with the exception of those preparing special education teachers, which must be approved by July 1, 2007.

That process has not occurred without some battles, Ms. Burns said. “When we had districts sit down with arts and sciences faculty, quite often they found that the existing university curriculum was not rigorous enough to address all of the K-12 content standards,” she said. “Therefore, we had arts and sciences faculty saying they needed to have more hours and more courses to make sure teachers have the content knowledge to truly address what they needed to know.”

That's led to a reduction in the time spent in teacher education coursework from 136 semester hours in some programs to an average of 124 to 126 hours statewide, she said.

The state also has piloted a "value added" system that will provide data on how teacher education graduates from each of the state's 21 universities contribute to the learning gains of their students.

In contrast, Georgia, which has one of the longest-standing P-16 efforts, has begun demonstration projects in specific areas to give focus to its work. Jan Kettlewell, the associate vice chancellor for P-16 initiatives for the University System of Georgia, said, otherwise, "The agenda is so big, you don't have any way to know if you're making a difference."

So while the state's P-16 efforts still aim to improve the school-to-college transition and educator preparation and retention, her office now does a lot of grant-financed demonstration projects to test new models that could ultimately be copied statewide, ranging from math and science initiatives to early-college high schools, small schools from which students earn both a high school diploma and an associate's degree or up to two years of college credit toward a bachelor's degree.

Having a staff of people assigned to work specifically on P-16 issues helps, Ms. Kettlewell noted, pointing to the 50 people who work in her office, as well as others across the various state agencies.

Kentucky Sets Bar

Kentucky's P-16 initiative, meanwhile, grew out of a broader push to improve educational attainment across its population, with an eye to statewide economic gains.

In 2004, Kentucky's ranking in per-capita personal income was 41st in the nation. That poor showing, policymakers reasoned, reflected the fact that 42 percent of Kentucky adults were reading or writing at only "basic" or "below basic" levels, according to a 2003 state assessment of adult literacy.

The state has set a goal of producing 791,000 working-age adults with bachelor's degrees or higher by 2020, to match the projected national average of 32 percent. That requires nearly doubling the number of Kentuckians with at least a four-year degree, which stood at 402,000 in 2000.

"This is a huge problem," said Thomas D. Lazell, the president of the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education, a 13-member board appointed by the governor to coordinate postsecondary and adult education. "The only chance of really attacking this successfully is to attack it in a coordinated way, with all the major parties at the table."

Kentucky was one of the first states to join the American Diploma Project, a multistate effort to identify the knowledge and skills high school graduates need for success in college and the workforce.

In 2004, Kentucky's postsecondary council adopted a statewide placement policy, which sets minimum scores on the English and math ACT college-admissions tests that automatically guarantee students' placement in credit-bearing courses in any of the state's public postsecondary institutions.

"It for the first time sent a clear statement of expectations to the K-12 system of what we were looking for at the postsecondary level," Mr. Lazell said. "And that, in turn, helped them move more quickly toward a single rigorous curriculum," an idea now endorsed by the P-16 council. This year, the legislature required all high school students to take the ACT as part of state testing.

Although the Kentucky coordinating board doesn't have a lot of authority over individual colleges and universities, said Janis Somerville, a senior associate at the National Association of System Heads, which represents the leaders of state higher education systems, "they just kept plugging."

One thing that has helped in Kentucky, officials say, is the adoption of concrete, measurable goals to drive policy changes. In addition, state legislation to reform both the K-12 and higher education systems created a policy framework that "facilitates these cross-sector, cross-agency discussions," said Mr. Lazell.

This spring, the state's public postsecondary institutions awarded nearly 24,000 degrees, diplomas, and certificates, a historic high that exceeded last year's record by 19.9 percent.

'Empty Shells'

Some experts worry, though, that many initiatives linking precollegiate and higher education fall short of making needed substantive changes.

Patrick M. Callan, the president of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, a policy and research group based in San Jose, Calif., suggests that too many statewide P-16 initiatives have a "tendency to equate activity with progress."

"I'm not against K-16 councils or commissions at the state level," he said, "but to some extent, they can be empty shells."

One problem, Mr. Callan said, is that while political leaders may preach to educators about the importance of collaboration, few states have been willing to change the policy infrastructure that makes such work difficult, such as the existence of separate legislative and budget committees for K-12 and higher education.

“If this isn’t important enough that it affects the way you do your budget, and what the incentives in the budget are,” he said, “then the real problem is that the people out there in the education community know the difference.”

In “Claiming Common Ground: State Policymaking for Improving College Readiness and Success,” a report issued in March, Mr. Callan and his co-authors say states should require K-12 and postsecondary education to align their courses and tests; put in place financial incentives and support to spur collaboration; develop the capacity to track students from the start of their schooling through college; and publicly report on student progress from high school through postsecondary education.

Unless states get traction on such issues soon, Mr. Callan argues, the deficiencies could stymie current efforts around high school improvement. “I don’t think in the K-12 world or in the higher education world this is yet accepted as a core part of the agenda,” he said. “It’s still much more in the ‘nice to do’ category.”

A year ago, the Washington-based Achieve Inc. formed the American Diploma Project Network, a coalition of 22 states committed to better preparing students for careers and college.

Since then, the nonprofit Achieve, formed by business leaders and governors, has been hosting “alignment institutes” for states to provide them with technical assistance on how to align their high school exit standards in English and mathematics with the knowledge and skills needed for success in postsecondary education and the workforce.

So far, 13 states have sent alignment teams—including precollegiate and postsecondary educators, academic-content specialists, and representatives from state education departments and the business community—to take part in the institutes. Five states—Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland, and Michigan—have had their draft standards reviewed by Achieve and plan to have them considered for approval by state governing boards within the next 10 or 12 months.

‘Part of the Solution’

The states also are considering how to incorporate the standards into policies and practices, such as high school graduation requirements, course descriptions, high school tests, and postsecondary placement policies, tests, articulation, and transfer agreements. “In some states, there wasn’t clearly a higher education system to engage,” Michael Cohen, the president of Achieve, said. “So it was figuring out how to connect with a range of institutions that didn’t have an effective coordinating or governing body or leadership.”

Whether higher education is sufficiently engaged is a topic of debate. One difference between P-16 efforts today and in the past, said Mr. Longanecker of WICHE, “is that higher education actually wants to be in the discussion.”

“They realize that they’ve got to be part of the solution now, rather than just bitching and moaning about the students who are coming,” he said.

But others are not so sure. “It’s very hard to get influential people in higher education at the table and get their faculties and institutions and statewide systems involved in this,” Mr. Kirst, the Stanford professor, said. “Essentially, higher education is not doing that badly, and they don’t see working on K-12 issues as a big priority.”

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FROM THE ARCHIVES

[“Ambiguity About Preparation for Workforce Clouds Efforts to Equip Students for Future,”](#) May 24, 2006.

[“Views Differ on Defining College Prep,”](#) April 26, 2006.

[“Economic Trends Fuel Push to Retool Schooling,”](#) March 22, 2006.

[“Kentucky Moves Toward College Test for All,”](#) March 22, 2006.

[“States Take Steps to Put More Rigor Into High Schools,”](#) March 2, 2005.

[“Studies Show High Schools’ Shortcomings,”](#) February 9, 2005.

[“Report: High Schools Must Demand More,”](#) January 5, 2005.

[“States Weigh ‘Value Added’ Models,”](#) November 24, 2004.

[“Kentucky Seeks to Improve College Readiness,”](#) November 17, 2004.

[“Ind. Considers Mandatory College-Prep Curriculum,”](#) October 27, 2004.

[“More in College Taking Remedial Courses, NCES Says,”](#) December 10, 2003.


[“Universities Seek ‘Seamless’ Link With K-12,”](#) February 7, 2001.

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Read a transcript of our exclusive online chat on [Beyond Grade 12: Preparing for College and Careers](#).

RESOURCES ON THE WEB

The [Education Commission of the States](#) posted an April 2006 policy brief on its [P-16 initiatives](#).

Also, view ECS' [resource page on P-16 systems](#), including the report [“What Is P-16 Education,”](#) and additional information. 

The [National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education](#) provides [K-16 reports](#), [case studies](#), and [publications](#), including [“Claiming Common Ground: State Policymaking for Improving](#)

[College Readiness and Success,”](#) March 2006. 

[Indiana's Education Roundtable](#) posts its [P-16 plan](#).

The [Learn More Resource Center](#), an Indiana organization that aims to support student achievement, has more information on Indiana's [Core 40 curriculum](#).

Learn more about Louisiana's [Blue Ribbon Commission for Educational Excellence](#), from the [state's office of the governor](#).

The [Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education](#) provides more information on its [P-16 council](#), created in 1999. The council also provides resources for [local P-16 councils](#).

View an [overview](#) of Georgia's Education Coordinating Council.

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